



## DULWICH COLLEGE

### EMINENT OLD ALLEYNIAN

#### **Captain Philip John Gardner VC MC**

Born 1914 School No. 11483 At Dulwich 1928-1932

Pip Gardner a one time pupil and Governor of the College and President of the Allyn Club; proud Officer of the Westminster Dragoons and The Royal Tank Regiment; Secretary of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, Managing Director and then Chairman of J Gardner and Company until he was 86, liveryman of the Tylers and Bricklayers Company, President of the Brunswick Boys Club; a strong Christian family man, a selfless and generous, sane and sensible, brave and courageous man. He was born and lived in Sydenham as a schoolboy at Dulwich. While at the College his major claim to military achievement was promotion to Bugle Serjeant in the Officer Training Corps. "*The Band played very well and so did the buglers*", reported the school magazine in 1930.

After leaving Dulwich he joined his Father's family engineering firm - there was no coercion but he was an engineer at heart - and J Gardner and Company was the Rolls Royce of the air-conditioning and ventilating industry. It was a measure of the Firm's reputation that in 1934 they were invited to install part of the air-conditioning system for the headquarters of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank. And it says something too, for Pip's education and character that at the age of nineteen the Firm despatched him to Hong Kong as their lone representative to assist with the draughtsmanship and engineering of the project. On arrival he was left to establish a factory of a hundred Chinese workers to manufacture the air-ducting as well as to recruit a team of 50 erectors to install it as the project progressed. It was a great challenge for a young man of Pip's age to be so heavily involved in such a large construction endeavour.

After 18 months in Hong Kong the work was successfully completed. Having worked - and played - so hard throughout his stay Pip decided to make his way back to England by completing a circuit of the world and so booked his passage via those most cosmopolitan and romantic of places - Shanghai and Peking, Tokyo and Honolulu, San Francisco and Los Angeles, Cuba and New York. "*He went as a boy*", his Father said at the time, "*and came back a man*". A course of liberal studies perhaps, the half of which has probably never been told.

Back in England in 1935 and resuming his work with the family firm he armed himself with a "T" type MG bought with money saved from his time in Hong Kong. This dashing motor car together, no doubt with his other many qualities, eventually brought him to the attention of the slim and attractive Renee Sherburn and after a prolonged campaign they were married in the summer of 1939. They were to remain together, happy and constant, for 63 years and their wedding picture shows a radiant and handsome couple as does their anniversary photograph 60 years later.

But with war looming this was the time when young men of military age if not of military inclination flocked to join the Territorial Army. In view of his mechanical aptitude and his liking for fast cars Pip elected to join an armoured unit - The Westminster Dragoons. At 5feet eight he was a convenient size to fit into the cramped interior of a tank and in due course he was to get to know that cramped interior very well.

After the phoney war, the Battle of Britain, armoured training and a brief flirtation with Commando forces Pip found himself in the Spring of 1941 joining the Fourth Royal Tank Regiment in Egypt. The Regiment was untested in battle and Pip was anxious to join the fray. He had not long to wait.

In the ebb and flow of battles against Rommel and his Africa Corps for the control of the western desert in 1941 the 4th Royal Tank Regiment began to play an important part and Second Lieutenant Gardner had his first taste of action in June as part of 4th Indian Division's attack on the Halfaya Pass. For the tanks the action was not a success. The two troops of Matilda tanks that involved Pip were heavily engaged, entered a minefield and lost all their tracks. The senior troop commander was killed on a mine in spite of Pip's valiant efforts to save him and Pip's own tank suffered a direct hit killing his driver. After a lengthy but static engagement of the enemy and vain attempts to repair the tracks Pip was forced to withdraw and lead the survivors back through the minefield at night. The next day he returned alone again through the minefield to immobilise the tanks guns and to recover the personal possessions of those that had been killed. It had been a salutary first experience of battle for Pip but his courage and his devotion to his duty had earned him a military cross. In this first testing experience he had revealed something of his true qualities.

In July his Regiment entered Tobruk from the sea and prepared to take part in what turned out to be a premature breakout by the besieged garrison. In February 1942 the London Gazette laconically reported an act of bravery on 23rd November 1941, "*The King - the Gazette stated - has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Victoria Cross to Lieutenant (acting Captain) Philip John Gardner MC, (132595) Royal Tank Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps, Sydenham.* The bare facts were these: During the breakout from Tobruk Pip was instructed to take two tanks to the assistance of two armoured cars of the Kings Dragoon Guards which were out of action and under intense fire in close proximity to the enemy. Manoeuvring his tank close up to the foremost car he dismounted in the face of fearful anti-tank and machine gun fire and secured a tow rope to the car. Seeing an officer with his legs blown off lying close by he lifted him into the car and then gave the order to tow. But wretchedly the tow rope broke. Pip dismounted again and returned to the armoured car and was immediately hit by enemy fire in the neck and leg. Despite his wounds he lifted the officer out of the car and half carried and half dragged him back to his tank, placing him on the engine louvres. He returned once again to the armoured car but there were no other survivors and he clambered back on his tank alongside the wounded officer to hold him on. He was wounded again in the arm as he did so. While the tank was being driven back to safety it was subjected to heavy shell fire and Pip's own loader was killed. In recording this act of sustained bravery carried out almost alone the official citation states how Pip's: "*courage, determination and complete disregard for his own safety, enabled him, despite his own wounds and in the face of intense fire at close range to save the life of his fellow officer*" and the citation ends in a characteristic piece of that now redundant form of English understatement "*and in circumstances fraught with great difficulty and danger*". This action was witnessed at a distance by the whole of Pip's Regiment who watched in horror and amazement as the scene unfolded before them. "*If God can bring me through what he has done already*" he wrote to his parents afterwards; "*he will certainly stand by me to the end.*" And of his wounds he wrote "*nothing serious - just a few odd bits and pieces in my leg, neck and arm*".

Throughout the next few months the 4th Royal Tank Regiment was almost continuously engaged and suffered a heavy attrition of tanks and men. But by the summer of 1942 as ill fate would have it Pip, by this time a battle veteran of the desert, found himself back in Tobruk and part of the ignominious surrender that followed the retreat of the 8th Army. Surrender and capture by the enemy is a traumatic experience under any circumstances and in Tobruk indignation, bewilderment and anger were rife. Pip along with others had tried to escape through Italian and German lines but after three days he was captured. He was a prisoner of the Italians, his battles in the desert were over and incarceration in a succession of Italian prisoner of war camps for over a year followed. Attempts to escape were rewarded by solitary confinement. But in September 1943 with the Allies already with a foothold in Italy and the Fascist government collapsing, Pip, in spite of orders to stay put, was off in an attempt to reach Allied lines 600 miles to the south. He escaped with two friends and together they moved off on an exciting and arduous journey. Assisted by partisans they worked their way southwards. Commandeered bicycles were exchanged for boots as they crossed the Apennines until Pip, separated from his friends, was delivered to the underground escaped prisoners network in Rome. Here he survived hidden in fragile safety. In a moment of much incredulity and immense danger he even managed to enjoy a performance of *La Traviata* - Gigli in the lead and the opera house stiff with German Officers and their girl friends. But after four months of freedom betrayal led to capture and interrogation by the Gestapo. Rail journeys by infamous cattle truck led Pip back north through a succession of camps and on into Germany. Stalag 4b at Muelberg, Oflag V111F in Czechoslovakia and then finally in May 1944 Pip reached Oflag 79 near Brunswick in western Germany. It can only have been Pip's redoubtable spirit

that kept him going through all those long days of degradation and despair, escape, survival and subsequent imprisonment.

It was at Brunswick, gainfully employed as a barber and tobacco fence and with the war nearing an end that Pip assisted his fellow officers in drawing up a plan to aid the less fortunate London boys who had suffered in the Blitz. They wrote a charter for a boys club that would be started on their return from captivity. Money was pledged in cheques written on scraps of paper by the prisoners. There were also raffles with prizes - some of most exotic nature - promised by individuals to help found the Brunswick Boys Club after the war. £13,000 was raised - no mean sum in those days and every pledge was redeemed after the war. That club prospers to this day and the clubhouse is dominated by a painting by a prisoner of the time that shows a company of muffled straight backed British prisoners at roll call in the camp to remind members of where it all started. Finally in May 1945 in the twilight of the Third Reich Oflag 79 was first bombed and then liberated by the American Allies and Pip's war and his long and hazardous odyssey from Tobruk to Brunswick was over.

Reunited with his elegant Renee, Pip resumed the life of normality that he had left five years before. He was especially welcomed home by the work force of the family firm with whom he had corresponded throughout his war and by whom he was held in such enormous regard. He was a man who in peace and war always looked after his people. His life now revolved around his family - there were his friends, the post-war challenges of his business, his professional and Regimental associations, his school, his livery company and his Brunswick Boys Club where he was a contributor and President for forty years in the same selfless way that he had contributed to his Regiment and his colleagues on the battlefield. He behaved the same way that he had always done - no one meeting him would ever have known what privations he had endured or what inner strength he possessed.

*"I was a bloody awful soldier"* Pip once told the cadets when inspecting the school Corps at Dulwich. Pip was a man who never displayed or advertised his extraordinary virtues and the qualities that he clearly had. He was a private man who never sought the limelight or felt that it was his. When asked about the deeds that won him his Victoria Cross he would, with the most genuine modesty, say *"Anyone would have done the same thing"*.

Based on the address given by Sir Peter Duffell (OA) at the Pip Gardner's Memorial Service March 2003